

# Arab Cinema

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## Arab Cinema

The "Arab world" constitutes twenty-two states spanning an area from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Arabian Gulf in the East, and from the Taurus mountains in the North to the Equator in the South. It has a multireligious and multiethnic population of nearly 300 million. As a mass art form, film was introduced in the main population centers of the region within the first two years of its invention in 1895. Over the following century, only seven Arab states established a significant or burgeoning film production activity. During this period Egypt, the cultural center of the Arab world, produced almost 75 percent of the total output of films in the region as well as comprising the largest share of the Arab film market. Eventually, Cairo became—and in many respects remains—the region's main center for film studios, artists, training facilities, technical support and expertise, and distribution networks. However, since the 1950s (and particularly since the mid-1980s) filmmaking activity in Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian community, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, as well as in Arab immigrant centers, has led to an increasingly heterogeneous and progressively more interactive Arab film culture.

## ARABS IN HOLLYWOOD

Before considering Arab cinema itself, it is useful to note a critical dynamic that has consistently marred Arab people's relationship with film: their image in Western cinemas. Many Arabs and Arab filmmakers view the portrayal of the Arab world in the West as a major obstacle to screening, publicizing, and appreciating a fundamentally vibrant Arab film culture. Vilifying and stereotyping Arabs has been a standard practice since the early years of cinema. Hollywood in particular has played a consistent role in spreading images that inculcate racist attitudes toward Arabs. As Jack Shaheen points out in a study of this issue, two groups, Arabs and Muslims (frequently, the two are erroneously collapsed into one identity), stand out as persistent targets of negative stereotyping in American cinema. By contrast, representations of other ethnic groups have gone through major positive changes since the late 1960s.

Since 1896, Hollywood filmmakers have categorized "the Arab" as the enemy. In *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937), the American heroine says: "All of them [Arabs] are alike for me." In Hollywood films the image of the Arab is all too familiar: dark-skinned men with large noses and black beards, wearing kuffiehs (headscarves) and dark sunglasses, and in the background a limousine, women in a harem, oil wells, and camels. A variation on this stereotype is the man with gun in hand and hatred in his eyes uttering

"Allah" or incomprehensible words. Arab women are mostly silent and ugly, or beautiful belly dancers and slaves who are often vindictive.

In hundreds of Hollywood films Arabs are the bad guys, and the good guys are out to eliminate them. Examples abound: Emory Johnson in *The Gift Girl* (1917), Gary Cooper in *Beau Sabreur* (1928), John Wayne in *I Cover the War* (1937), Burt Lancaster in *Ten Tall Men* (1951), Dean Martin in *The Ambushers* (1967), Sean Connery in *Never Say Never Again* (1983), Kurt Russell in *Executive Decision* (1996), and Brendan Fraser in *The Mummy* (1999), to name just a few. Long before September 11, 2001, Hollywood Arabs have been invading America and killing its innocents. From *The Golden Hands of Kurigal* (1949) to *The Terror Squad*

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(1987) to *The Siege* (1998), the theme of the looming Arab threat to America persists.

Arabs are also almost always anti-Christian. In *Another Dawn* (1937), an American army officer asks, "why do Arabs hate westerners?" The answer is, "it is the deep Moslem hatred for Christians." Islam itself is associated with violence, as in *Legion of the Doomed* (1958), in which one Arab tells another: "Kill him [your enemy] before he kills you.... You are after all uttering the words of Allah." Other films, such as *Rollover* (1981), *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985), *American Ninja 4* (1990), and *Team America: World Police* (2004), associate Arabs and Muslims with hatred and violence.

The extent to which this stereotypical image of Arabs and the Arab world has influenced Western attitudes toward Arab cinema itself, even among film scholars, is a subject for further discussion. At a minimum, Arab cinema continues to be largely relegated to the margins of English-language film studies; whatever scholarly work on Arab cinema does exist is disproportionate to this cinema's influence in the Arab world itself and in major areas of Africa and East Asia. Yet, since the 1990s, Western interest in films originating in Arab countries has increased. More than ever before, Arab films are making the rounds of film festivals and repertory or art cinemas in Europe and North America. Recently, the Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad's (b. 1961) film *Paradise Now* (2005) won major festival awards including the Golden Globes (2006) and the Berlin festival (2005). The film was also nominated for Best Foreign Film at the American Academy Awards® (2006). Along with this wider exposure, Arab cinema has become of increasing interest to film critics and scholars.

## BEGINNINGS AND LANDMARKS

Domestic film production activity in several Arab countries other than Egypt remained limited and sporadic until they gained their independence in the period between the early 1940s and the early 1960s. During the colonial period, film production was mostly attributable to the initiative of ambitious young artists and entrepreneurs who were enthused about cinema and the possibility of making quick profits. In 1928 *Al Mutaham al bari* (*The Innocent Victim*) became the first Syrian feature-length fiction film. Based on real events, it tells the story of a band of thieves who spread havoc across Damascus. Its producers also created a film production company, Hermon Film. Despite the film's commercial success, the budding Syrian film industry nearly died out owing to the arrival of sound and the ability of Egyptian film to streamline and diversify its mass production. In Lebanon cinema did not come into existence until the early 1960s, although, as in Syria, attempts at filmmaking had begun in the late 1920s. The first Lebanese film, *Mughammarat Elias Mabruk* (*The Adventures of Elias Mabruk*, 1930), is a silent amateur comedy about a Lebanese immigrant who returns home from America.

Similarly, in the Arab Maghreb—Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria—national cinema only emerged in the aftermath of these countries' independence. The French in 1946 created major studios in Tunisia

(Studios Africa) and Morocco (Studios Souissi), but they did so as part of a strategy to ensure the creation of an Arabic-language cinema alternative (with colonialist French propaganda) that could counter the popularity of Egyptian cinema. Films emerging from these studios were all foreign-directed, -produced, and -written.

The postcolonial period in the Arab world witnessed unprecedented interest in creating authentic national cinema. Throughout the 1940s and into the mid-1970s, however, Egyptian cinema maintained its position as the major attraction for Arab audiences across the region. But the rise of left-leaning, pan-Arab nationalist regimes in several countries ultimately encouraged the public sector to play a major role in filmmaking. In Egypt this shift weakened the private film industry, but in other respects it also improved the quality of production and helped diversify and widen the thematic and stylistic interests of Egyptian cinema. In Syria and Algeria public-sector film production benefited from new regulations allowing the use of a proportion of the income generated from the distribution of foreign films. Government support also helped expand filmmaking activity and inadvertently launched the careers of numerous Arab filmmakers.

In 1959 the new left-leaning nationalist government in Iraq created the Cinema and Theatre General Organization. The organization soon undertook the production of several documentaries and a few fiction shorts and features. In the late 1970s a cinema department was created at the University of Fine Arts that was later provided with state-of-the-art equipment. With the launching of the Iraq-Iran War in the early 1980s, however, Iraqi cinema drew to a virtual halt. Aside from a few propaganda films (such as the 1981 film *Al-Qadisiya*, a historical epic made on commission by the veteran Egyptian filmmaker Salah Abouseif), filmmaking became almost entirely restricted to reflecting the opinions of political authority. In Syria, on the other hand, the creation of the General Institution of Cinema in 1963 signaled the beginning of a new filmmaking culture.

By the 1970s Syria was producing a number of high-quality documentary and fiction films. At the time, films like *Knife* (Khaled Hammada, 1971), *al-Makhdu'un* (*The Dopes*, Tewfik Saleh, 1972), and *Kafr Kasem* (Borhan Alaouie, 1974) made Damascus the focal point of an "alternative" Arab filmmaking movement. These films

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influenced film practice in other Arab countries and rejuvenated interest in themes of social, cultural, and anticolonial resistance. In the 1980s, however, Syrian cinema became more associated with a limited group of auteurs such as Samir Zikra (b. 1945) (*Hadisat an-nusf meter* [The Half-meter incident], 1981), Mohamed Malas (*Ahlam el Madina* [Dreams of the City], 1985), and Osama Muhammad (b. 1954) (*Stars in Broad Daylight*, 1988).

Palestinian cinema, on the other hand, emerged in the late 1960s in the refugee camps of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria and in conjunction with the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Film activity began with the creation of the Photography and Cinema Section of the PLO, which produced and gathered footage on current political events. With the later creation of the Palestinian Cinema Institution, young filmmakers/activists such as Samir Nimr, Mustafa Abu Ali, and Qasem Hawal and the cinematographer Hany Jawahrieh began to make feature documentaries depicting the situation in southern Lebanon, battles with the Israeli army, and Israeli raids on PLO bases. Among the first films to attract international attention was Hawal's *Limatha Nazraa Al-Ward? ... Limatha Nahmil Al-Banadiq? ... (Why Do We Plant Roses? ... Why Do We Carry Guns? ..., 1974)*, a poetic documentary on Palestinian participation in the Tenth International Youth Festival in Berlin (held in the former German Democratic Republic) in 1973.

After Algeria won independence in 1962, its films mainly focused on themes relating to the war of liberation. Several such films became landmarks in the history of what came to be known as Third Cinema. Also in 1962 a private production company helped finance several big-budget European films, among which was the classic *La Battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1965) by Gillo Pontecorvo (b. 1919). After Algeria nationalized its film industry in 1964, the National Centre of Cinema was created. The Centre produced several high-profile films like *Rih al awras* (*Winds of the Aures*, 1966) by Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina (b. 1934); *L'Opium et le baton* (*The opium and the stick*, 1970) by Ahmed Rachedi (b. 1938); and *The South Wind* (*Rih al-Djanub*, 1975) by Mohamed Slim Riad (b. 1932), along with numerous documentary and feature shorts. By the mid-1970s an average of five feature films per year were being produced, including Hamina's big-budget epic, *Chronique des années de braise* (*Chronicle of the Years of Fire*), which won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1975. The film focused on a family in an Algerian village and its fight against poverty, a mad village prophet, feudal collaborators with French colonialism, and religious fanatics. By the early 1980s an increasing number of filmmakers began to focus on issues of land reform, industrialization, and the situation of North African immigrant workers in Europe. The work of Al-Amin Mirbal, Mohammed Bou-Ammari (b. 1941), and Mirzak Allouashe (b. 1944) reflected these emerging preoccupations.

Even countries unaffected by the new active involvement of the public sector experienced the rejuvenation of cinema. In Lebanon, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s (the beginning of the Lebanese civil war), an influx of Egyptian filmmakers and film personnel fleeing the constrictions placed on their work by the nationalization of various branches of the film industry helped create a hub for film production investment and activity. However, as early as 1952 (even before the nationalization of Egyptian cinema), two studios, Al-Arz and Haroun, were already in place. Another production company, Georges Nasser's Films, made important and widely screened films such as *Ila ayn* (*Whither?*, 1958) and *Al Gharib al saghir* (*The Small Stranger*, 1960). By the mid-1960s large sums of capital had been invested in the film industry in Lebanon, and new studios with high-quality equipment such as Ba'albeck, Near East Sound, and Modern were created. Following Egypt's lead, Lebanon created a university-level film training institute at St. Joseph University in Beirut.

Ironically, the most important period in the history of Lebanese cinema was born out of the destruction of civil war. Widely acclaimed films were made in the 1970s and 1980s in Lebanon and in exile by experimental feature documentarists such as Borhan Alaouié (*Kafr Kasem*, 1974, and *Beyrouthou el lika* [*Beirut—The Encounter*], 1981), Heini Srour (*Saat el Fahrir Dakkat, Barra ya Isti Mar* [*The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived*], 1974), Jocelyn Saab (*Egypt City of the Dead*, 1978), Maroun Bagdadi (*Beyrouth ya Beyrouth* [*Beirut Oh Beirut*], 1975, and *Les Petites guerres* [*Little Wars*], 1982), and Jean Chamoun and Mai Masri (*Tel al-Zaatar*, 1979; *Under the Rubble*, 1983; *Wild Flowers: Women of South Lebanon*, 1986; *The War Generation*, 1988; and *Children of Fire*, 1990). All these films captured the anxiety of a war-torn country and people, and the suspended dreams associated with the Palestinian dilemma.

Postindependence film production in Tunisia and Morocco took longer to emerge than it did in other Arab countries. However, despite its reliance on sporadic individual initiatives, filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s signified the birth of an authentic movement that fostered the emergence in the 1990s of a new Arab national cinema. In Tunisia the completion of the publicly supported Gammarth studios in 1968 facilitated early training of several young cinephiles. But it was not until the 1980s that Tunisian filmmakers began to make their

## **ELIA SULEIMAN**

### **b. Nazareth, Israel, 1960**

With only six films to his credit to date, the Palestinian director, writer, producer, and actor Elia Suleiman already has won the attention of film critics around the world. Suleiman left his hometown of Nazareth in Israel to live and study film in New York City where he spent nearly twelve years in a self-imposed exile. Two of his feature films, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1997) and *Yadon ilaheyya (Divine Intervention)*, 2002), garnered eight major awards in international film festivals (Chicago, Bodil, Cannes, Cinemanila, European, Rotterdam, Seattle, and Venice). In 2002 the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences did not allow *Divine Intervention* to be entered for competition in the Best Foreign Language Film category, igniting major controversy (although one Academy official claimed that Suleiman did not actually submit the film). Many saw the decision as a political rejection of Palestine; however, the film was allowed to compete in 2003.

Suleiman focuses on the Palestinian dilemma, but his approach mixes humor, ambiguous imagery, and heavyhanded sloganeering. His stories are fragmented rather than constructed as seamless and straightforward narratives. Suleiman often plays himself, a filmmaker pursuing motivation and deliverance through his relationship with a politically active Arab female protagonist. With a style reminiscent of the French director Jacques Tati, Suleiman's witty, absurd and highly unsettling portraits of the lives of the Palestinian middle class offer a scathing political critique of its class's complicity in the political stagnation that afflicts the Palestinian predicament.

With *Chronicle of a Disappearance* Suleiman offered a unique vision of the theme of living under occupation. The film invokes *Waiting for Godot* as it presents the story of people waiting, and waiting, for something that never happens. *Divine Intervention* tells the story of a young Palestinian filmmaker. The film is built around numerous segments depicting the life of the filmmaker as he discerns moments of inaction and waiting among some middle class Palestinians. The only action in the film occurs in the imagination of the filmmaker: he eats an apple and throws away the remains only to have it turn into a bomb that destroys an Israeli tank; a balloon with the image of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat surmounts Israeli barriers and unites with the dome of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Israeli-occupied east Jerusalem. In one of the most memorable and fitting comments on the Palestinian people's state of affairs, the final shot is that of the filmmaker and his mother watching a pressure cooker. "It should be enough now—turn the heat off," the mother tells her son as the shot intolerably lingers on the pot about to boil over.

Suleiman's utilization of static long shots and slow editing rhythm might not be a preferred choice for some viewers. This, as an example, has effected how his films were received among some Palestinian critics, some of whom saw his style as somewhat elitist. Yet, his film aesthetics indeed represent an original and somewhat unique attempt to cinematically translate both personal and collective experiences of people living in the shadow of occupation.

## **RECOMMENDED VIEWING**

*Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), *Harb El Khalij ... wa baad (The Gulf War ... What Next?, segment: Homage by Assassination*, 1993), *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1997), *War and Peace in Vesoul* (1997), *Cyber Palestine* (1999), *Divine Intervention* (2002)

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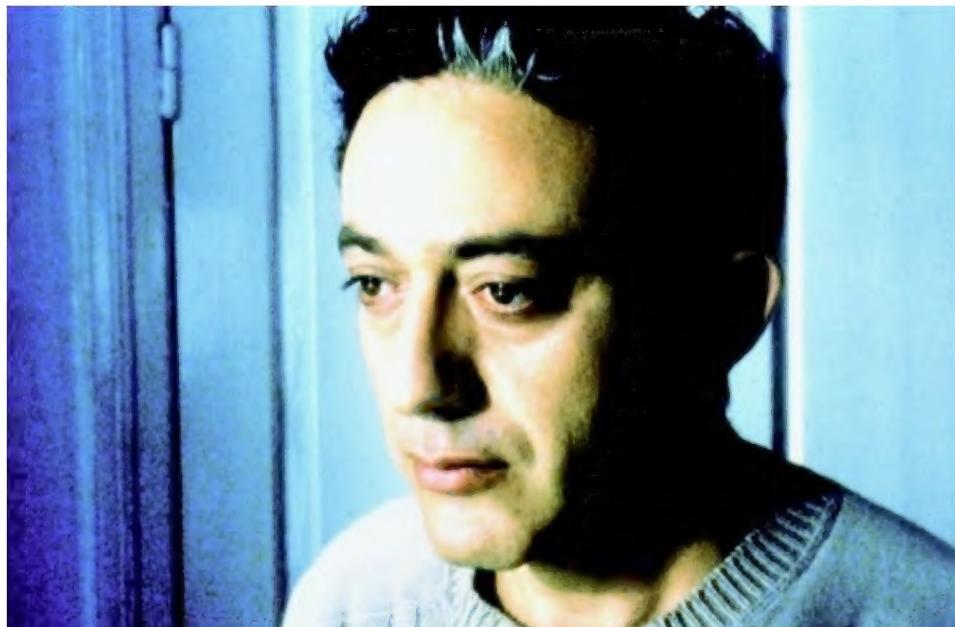
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**Elia Suleiman.** EVERETT

COLLECTION. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

mark on Arab cinema. *Aziza* (Abdellatif Ben Ammar, 1980), along with *Dhil al Ardh* (*The Shadow of the Earth*, Taieb Louhichi, 1982), *Les Baliseurs du désert* (*The wanderers*, Nacer Khemir, 1986), and *Rih essed* (*Man of Ashes*, Nouri Bouzid, 1986), were enthusiastically received by film critics in both Europe and the Arab world. The films addressed various aspects of the decline of agrarian social and economic structures in the face of foreign capital invasions.

In Morocco, *Wechna* (*Traces*, Hamid Benani, 1972), *Les Milles et Une Main* (*A Thousand and One Hands*, Souheil Ben-Barka, 1972), and *La Guerre de pétrole n'aura pas lieu* (*The oil war did not happen*, 1975), along with *Winds of the East* (*el-Cherqui*, Moumen Smihi, 1975) and *Trances* (Ahmed El Maanouni, 1981) all reflected the emergence of a stylistically and thematically rich cinematic movement. These films sensitively evoked social, political, and cultural predicaments and landscapes. The government-

created agency Fonds de Soutien a l'Expansion de l'Industrie Cinématographique expanded its role in the 1980s, allowing Moroccan feature film production to grow at unprecedented rates: thirty-three films were produced in just six years, from 1980 to 1986.

## ARAB CINEMA SINCE THE LATE 1980s

Since the late 1980s Arab cinema has responded to greater political openness and relative relaxation of official censorship in various Arab states. In addition, a growing number of filmmakers, both local and émigré, have made use of financial and logistical support provided by European producers and agencies. New Arab cinema is also increasingly becoming less Egypt-centered and more trans-Arab in terms of production, themes, and audiences. Although market regulations (leaving local Arab film industries unprotected against Western-based films) and censorship of religious, political, and sexual content take their toll, Arab cinema is fast becoming more interconnected and diversified in its outlook and its audience. On the level of production, for example, Egyptian films are increasingly being produced by Lebanese and Gulf state investors. Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and Arab North African filmmakers have also been involved in numerous ventures with European government and private-sector agencies such as Montecinemaverita Foundation and La Sept-Arte, and Egyptian films have been steadily featuring stars from Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

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In a related arena, an increasing number of television dramas are being made for trans-Arab distribution. After Egypt, Syria has become the second-largest producer of television drama and comedy. In 2004 more than seventy television shows were produced in Syria, most of which were widely distributed and extremely popular around the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf states. Greater relaxation of government restriction on private industries, combined with the recent building of major film and television production facilities near Damascus and the influx of business investments from various Gulf countries, together have created a potentially major base for a trans-Arab film and television industry based in Syria. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of movie theaters around the region remain locally owned and operated, enhancing possibilities for the growth of Arab national cinema and encouraging more diversity in film programming. At the most basic level, these theaters ensure that films from across the Arab world can be seen by other Arabs.

## THEMES

Since the late 1980s the anxieties associated with, on the one hand, the stagnation of the pan-Arab project of national self-determination, and on the other, the wave of religious fundamentalism, have been reflected in Arab cinema. Cinema in the region is increasingly reaching toward a national identity struggling to affirm its heterogeneity and to find a new role in the fight for social and national liberation.

In Egypt, the film production center of the Arab world, the wave of Islamic fundamentalism directly affected intellectual and cultural life, resulting in a flood of films dealing with the issue. Algerian and Tunisian filmmakers have also explicitly tackled fundamentalism, depicting its practices and its impact on youth and youth culture. In Merzak Allouache's *Bab El-Oued City* (1994), the protagonist, Boualem, works the night shift in a bakery. He steals the loudspeaker installed on the roof by a group of religious fanatics who use it to increase their influence in the district. Yamina Bachir's (b. 1954)

Rachida (2002), looks at religious terrorism against women through the eyes of a schoolteacher who refuses to abandon her profession and accept the role prescribed for her by religious fanatics.

Emerging out of the highly charged political atmosphere in the region throughout the 1990s and beyond, numerous popular films have commented on colonial and neocolonial dominance there. Osama Mohammad's stylized approximation of life in a small village in Syria during the 1967 war with Israel, *Sunduq al-dunyâ* (*The Box of Life*, 2002) links the struggle to modernize social relations with resistance against neocolonialism. In turn, new Arab cinema tends to foreground social and cultural settings and characters that reflect a rapidly changing society struggling to reclaim its national identity against internal as well as external pressures. The Lebanese filmmaker Randa Chahal Sabag's (b. 1953) film *Le cerf-volant* (*The Kite*, 2003) turns an across-the-barbed-wire love story between a young Arab girl and an Arab Israeli soldier (both from the same Druze religion) into a stinging critique of the oppressive reality of occupation. Earlier examples of this new trend include *Asfour Stah* (*Halfaouine: Child of the Terraces*, Férid Boughedir, Tunisia, 1990), *al-Kompars* (*The Extras*, Nabil Maleh, Syria, 1993), and *al-Lail* (*The Night*, Mohamed Malas, Syria, 1993).

In a related thrust, the Palestinian dilemma remains among the more frequently visited themes in Arab cinema. Since the late 1980s, however, more emphasis has been put on approaching the issue through the eyes of its real victims: refugees, peasants, fishermen, working-class and unemployed Palestinians. Filmmakers such as Michel Khleifi (*The Tale of the Three Lost Jewels*, 1994), Elia Suleiman (*Yadon ilaheyya [Divine Intervention]*, 2002), Hany Abu-Assad (*Al Qods Fee Yom Akhar [Rana's Wedding]*, 2002), and Yousri Nasrallah (*Bab el shams [The Gate of Sun]*, 2004) place an accent on exploring the politics of personal experience.

New Arab films also approach the notion of national self-determination with an eye for celebrating the heterogeneity of Arab identity and culture. The role of Arab Christians in the religiously diverse Arab society is one of the narrative threads, if not necessarily a main theme, running through several Arab films. However, since the creation of the state of Israel, allusion to Jews as part of the Arab cultural mosaic has largely remained a taboo in Arab cinema. This taboo has been frequently challenged in Arab films since the mid-1990s. Férid Boughedir's 1996 film *Unété à La Goulette* (*A Summer in La Goulette*) includes a Jewish girl as one of its three main characters. Presenting the story of three Tunisian teenage girls—a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew—the film revisits history by way of exploring the religious and cultural richness of Arab identity. During the 2003 Ismailia International Film Festival for Documentary and Short Films in Egypt (the largest festival of its kind in the Arab world), the first prize was awarded to *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs—The Iraqi Connection* (Samir, 2002), which depicts the life and struggle of four Iraqi communist Jews as they face national alienation as Arabs living in Israel.

The notion of national identity and resistance is increasingly becoming integral to the discussion of gender



**Manal Khader in Divine**

**Intervention (Elia Suleiman, 2002).** EVERETT COLLECTION. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

and sexual politics. One early example is the classic *Urs al-jalil* (*Wedding in Galilee*, Michel Khleifi, 1987), which draws connections between repressive gender and sexual relations within Palestinian society and the stagnating efforts to achieve national liberation for Palestinians. *Samt el qusur* (*The Silences of the Palace*, Moufida Tlatli, 1994) redefines the parameters for the struggle of its female protagonist to affirm her personal identity: in the end, rejecting her boyfriend's wishes to abort her baby denotes her resistance to patriarchy, but also underscores her defiance of today's "postindependence" power elite and its complicity with colonial and neocolonial interests.

More Arab filmmakers are also intrepidly delving into the issue of gay and bisexual relations within Arab society. Two examples are the 1998 Moroccan film *Adieu Forain* by Daoud Aoulad-Syad (b. 1953), which features a homosexual transvestite dancer in the lead role, and *Une minute de soleil en moins* (*A Minute of Sun Less*, Nabil Ayouch, 2002), in which the principal character is a police inspector whose friend is a transvestite. Other films are even clearer in their rebellion against the sexual repression of gays and bisexuals, but because of their experimental character they are less likely to reach a wide audience. The Lebanese director Akram Zaatari's documentary short, *How I Love You* (2002), and the Palestinian Tawfiq Abu Wael's dramatic short, *Diary of a Male Whore* (2001), are two important cases in point.

## PATTERNS IN NEW ARAB CINEMA

Since its early beginnings in the late 1920s and until the late 1940s, the influential Arab Egyptian cinema evolved and reinvented itself largely by incorporating Hollywood's well-tested formulas. By the mid-1950s Egyptian cinema was loosely amalgamating various realist cinematic trends, including French poetic realism, Italian neorealism, and socialist realism. It also began to incorporate modernist German expressionist tendencies as well as early Soviet dialectical montage. These impulses, however, were assimilated by Egyptian and other Arab filmmakers as complementary rather than antithetical to existing local

In the Palestinian film *Divine Intervention* (2002), directed by Elia Suleiman, the story of a young Palestinian filmmaker (played by Suleiman himself) is punctuated by shots of the filmmaker placing the film's cue cards on the wall of his apartment. *Kanya Ya Ma Kan, Beyrouth (Once Upon a Time in Beirut, 1995)*, by Jocelyn Saab (b. 1948), concerns the search by two young women for their own city. It presents a barrage of archival footage, film clips, and images of old downtown movie theaters, as the two women attempt a sort of excavation of the Lebanese capital before the civil war. Their search ends in the discovery of Western and Arabic film clips—including ones made by the Lumière Brothers—from the 1920s up to the early 1970s. And in *West Beyrouth* (Ziad Doueiri, 1998), a young boy's infatuation with his Super-8 camera results in his becoming a witness to the destruction of his war-torn city.

Developments in communications technologies, including the mushrooming of Arab satellite film and television networks, were a major element in the expansion of Arab cinema at the end of the twentieth century. Film festivals in the region are also growing. Among the most influential annual events that screen films from the Arab world and elsewhere are the Cairo, Beirut, Marrakesh, Damascus, and Carthage Film Festivals as well as the Dubai Film Festival, created in 2004. The burgeoning annual Ismailiah International Documentary Film Festival in Egypt has also become a major outlet for screening and discussing the latest trends in Arab documentary and experimental filmmaking. All these events are increasingly informing and informed by a renaissance of a pan-Arab national cultural interaction.

Important distribution centers for Arab film in the West include New Yorker Video, Winstar Home Video, and Kino International, all in New York. The largest source of Arab films remains Arab Film Distribution in Seattle. Among the major events that regularly screen Arab films are the Arab Film Festival in San Francisco (organized by Cinemayaat), the Seattle Film Festival (Arab Film Distribution), the Arab Film Festival in Montreal (organized in coordination with Cinémathèque Québécoise), the Biennial of Arab Cinemas (organized in Paris by l'Institut du Monde Arabe), and Arabscreen, a documentary and short festival in London.

On the one hand, and more than ever before in contemporary Arab history, a cultural revival is transcending divisions and borders between various Arab states, regions and peoples—a division originally prescribed and designed by colonial powers in the first decade of the twentieth century. This revival appears to be ushering in a new period in the development of Arab cinema. On the other hand, political tensions in the Middle East—including the continuing Palestinian dilemma, and the ramifications of the Gulf War (1992) and the Iraq War (2003) (both of which are widely viewed in the area as reflections of neocolonialist designs and interventions)—continue to stimulate politically and culturally conscious preoccupations in film. This complex backdrop has encouraged the emergence of new thematic trends and stylistic patterns in various areas of cultural production, including filmmaking. It has allowed for the growth of film practices that favor breaking down artificial barriers—of form, nationality, and "high" and "low" art—that so often delineate cinematic practices in the West. All this can only signal new beginnings for a cinema that bears the responsibility of expressing the struggles of its people.

**SEE ALSO** Egypt ; Iran ; National Cinema ; Third Cinema

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